

# **Evaluation of the Indianapolis Mayor Sponsored Charter Schools**

## **Damar Charter Academy Fourth-year Charter Review**

**2014-2015 School Year**

**Mary Jo Rattermann, Ph.D.**

**Azure D. S. Angelov, Ph.D.**

# OFFICE OF EDUCATION INNOVATION

## Office of the Mayor of Indianapolis

### FOURTH YEAR CHARTER REVIEW

#### *Damar Charter Academy*

November 17 & 18, 2014

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The Indianapolis Mayor's Office Fourth Year Charter Review (FYCR) is designed to assess the fourth year of the school as it fully implements the policies and procedures developed in the previous academic years. The Fourth Year Charter Review Protocol is based on the *Performance Framework*, which is used to determine a school's success relative to a common set of indicators, as well as school-based goals.

***Consistent with the Indianapolis Mayor's Office Performance Framework, the following four core questions and sub-questions are examined to determine a school's success:***

***Is the educational program a success?***

- 1.1. *Is the school's academic performance meeting state expectation, as measured by Indiana's accountability system?*
- 1.2. *Are students making sufficient and adequate gains, as measured by the Indiana Growth model?*
- 1.3. *Does the school demonstrate that students are improving, the longer they are enrolled at the school?*
- 1.4. *Is the school providing an equitable education to students of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds?*
- 1.5. *Is the school's attendance rate strong?*
- 1.6. *Is the school outperforming schools that the students would have been assigned to attend?*
- 1.7. *Is the school meeting its school-specific educational goals?*

***Is the organization in sound fiscal health?***

- 2.1. *Short term Health: Does the school demonstrate the ability to pay its obligations in the next 12 months?*
- 2.2. *Long term Health: Does the organization demonstrate long term financial health?*
- 2.3. *Does the organization demonstrate it has adequate financial management and systems?*

***Is the organization effective and well-run?***

- 3.1. *Is the school leader strong in his or her academic and organizational leadership?*
- 3.2. *Does the school satisfactorily comply with all its organizational structure and governance obligations?*
- 3.3. *Is the school's board active, knowledgeable and abiding by appropriate policies, systems and processes in its oversight?*
- 3.4. *Does the school's board work to foster a school environment that is viable and effective?*

3.5. *Does the school comply with applicable laws, regulations and provision of the charter agreement relating to the safety and security of the facility?*

***Is the school providing the appropriate conditions for success?***

- 4.1. *Does the school have a high-quality curriculum and supporting materials for each grade?*
- 4.2. *Are the teaching processes (pedagogies) consistent with the school's mission?*
- 4.3. *For secondary students, does the school provide sufficient guidance on and support and preparation for post-secondary options?*
- 4.4. *Does the school effectively use learning standards and assessments to inform and improve instruction?*
- 4.5. *Has the school developed adequate human resource systems and deployed its staff effectively?*
- 4.6. *Is the school's mission clearly understood by all stakeholders?*
- 4.7. *Is the school climate conducive to student and staff success?*
- 4.8. *Is ongoing communication with students and parents clear and helpful?*
- 4.9 *Is the school properly maintaining special education files for its special needs students?*
- 4.10 *Is the school fulfilling its legal obligations related to access and services to English as Second Language (ESL) students?*

#### COMPLETION OF THE FOURTH YEAR CHARTER REVIEW

As part of its oversight of charter schools, the Office of Education Innovation of the Mayor of Indianapolis authorized Research & Evaluation Resources (RER) to conduct site visits of schools in their fourth year of operation. The purpose is to present the school and the Office of Education Innovation a professional judgment on conditions and practices at the school, which are best provided through an external perspective. This report uses multiple sources of evidence to understand the school's performance. Evidence collection begins before the visit with the review of key documents and continues on-site through additional document review, classroom visits and interviews with any number of stakeholders. Findings provided by the site visit team can be used to celebrate what the school is doing well and prioritize its areas for improvement in preparation for renewal. It is the task of the site visit team to report on the following pre-identified aspects of the *Performance Framework* and to assist the Office of Education Innovation in its completion of the FYCR Protocol: ***Responses to sub-questions 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10 of Core Question 4.***

The outcome of this review will provide the school with written report that includes a judgment and supporting evidence on various aspects of the school, based on a rubric of indicators<sup>1</sup> developed for each of the four core questions and sub-questions in the *Performance Framework*. The assessment system utilizes the following judgments:

*Does not meet standard*

*Approaching standard*

*Meets standard*

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<sup>1</sup> Rubric indicators are subject to revision by the Office of Education Innovation.

## Background and History of the Damar Charter Academy

*Our mission is to provide students with autism and other developmental and intellectual challenges the opportunity to achieve to their highest academic potential while developing practical behavioral, communication and daily living skills toward improved community integration and success. Damar Charter Academy utilizes best practice and research informed teaching and support strategies tailored specifically to each student as developed and reflected in an individual education plan.*

The charter application of Damar Charter Academy was approved in February of 2011, and the school first accepted students in the fall of 2011. The enrollment goal for the first year of operation was 150 students, a goal that was met and exceeded by 15 students for a total of 165 students. Based on current demand, enrollment could have been higher, but the Damar Charter Academy charter only allowed an additional 10 percent of the original enrollment figure to be added in its first year. The original charter application proposed that by its sixth year of operation, the Damar Charter Academy would enroll 300 students each year, however current projections based on budget, staffing and space restrictions has led that to be revised to 165 students through the 6<sup>th</sup> year of operation. The school operates on a balanced schedule that mirrors the schedule of Indianapolis Public Schools, in order to provide for shorter breaks that are more evenly spaced throughout to help students maintain the progress they have made. As students complete the requirements of the Damar Charter Academy or transition/return to other school settings, new students will fill their spots to begin making progress on their individualized education plans.

Damar Charter Academy was originally housed on the campus of Damar Services, but moved to a building on Decatur Boulevard in the spring semester of the 2012-13 academic year. Many of the services that are necessary to educate the student population of Damar Charter Academy are still provided by Damar Services at the new location. Despite the additional complexity of providing support to Damar Charter Academy students not on the Damar Services campus, the move to the new facility has gone quite smoothly and appears to be a resounding success.

Currently, students at Damar Charter Academy either live in the residential area of the Damar campus and are bused to and from Damar Charter Academy daily or live at home and are brought to the school either by their parents or by Damar provided transportation. Many of the teachers at Damar Charter Academy have been employees of Damar Services for many years, with a group of them having previously taught at the Damar School, a private school that is also located on campus.

Damar Charter Academy has experience a remarkable consistency among staff and leadership: Ms. Aimee Brown, the Director of Special Education, and Ms. Julie Gurule, the Director of Admissions, have been with DCA since opening day. When the school opened, the principal was Mr. Dwight Ashley, who had previously been in a leadership position at the Damar School. Mr. Ashley left in the first year of the school, and was replaced by Ms. Leta Echelbarger. Ms. Echelbarger joined Damar Charter Academy late in the Fall semester of 2012, and stayed until the end of the Spring 2014

semester. Damar Charter Academy has successfully hired a new principal who will be starting in January of 2015.

### **School Specific Goals**

Observable and sustained educational and daily living outcomes serve as the measurement of the effectiveness of the Damar Charter Academy. Educational outcomes in the Damar Academy Charter School are individualized for each student and are applicable in a variety of settings (school, home, community) – not just the classroom. General categories/areas of outcome focus for Damar Charter Academy students include:

- Improved Academic Achievement
- Improved Behavioral Stability
- Improved Communication Skills
- Improved Social Functioning
- Improved Independence
- Improved Vocational Skills (when applicable)

### **The Evaluation Process**

This report represents an evaluation of performance in each of the standards and indicators that are the responsibility of RER to evaluate. These indicators are outlined in the Performance Framework.

Research & Evaluation Resources staff engaged in a number of evidence-collecting activities. The focus of this evaluation was to gauge perceptions of key stakeholders at the school in relation to the areas of the performance framework that are part of the evaluation. RER conducted focus group discussions with students, staff, and parents, as well as interviews with the school administration and leadership. These focus groups and interviews were conducted in on site during a two-day site visit occurring on October 17 & 18, 2014.

Seven classrooms were observed using the instrument provided by the Office of Education Innovation, which was modified to include aspects of the Special Education review protocol currently being used by the Office of Education Innovation. Because Damar Charter Academy serves a unique student population, Dr. Angelov & Dr. Rattermann both performed classroom observations. Each observation lasted approximately 45 minutes, and over half of the teaching staff was observed once. The classroom observer spent five hours (300 minutes) observing 7 classrooms, 97 students, and 7 teachers.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS DAMAR CHARTER ACADEMY

<b><i>Core Question 4: Is the school providing the appropriate conditions for success?</i></b>	<b><i>Finding</i></b>
<i>4.1. Does the school have a high-quality curriculum and supporting materials for each grade?</i>	<b>Meets standard</b>
<i>4.2. Are the teaching processes (pedagogies) consistent with the school's mission?</i>	<b>Meets standard</b>
<i>4.4. Does the school effectively use learning standards and assessments to inform and improve instruction?</i>	<b>Meets standard</b>
<i>4.5. Has the school developed adequate human resource systems and deployed its staff effectively?</i>	<b>Does Not Meet Standard</b>
<i>4.6. Is the school's mission clearly understood by all stakeholders?</i>	<b>Meets standard</b>
<i>4.7. Is the school climate conducive to student and staff success?</i>	<b>Meets standard</b>
<i>4.8. Is ongoing communication with students and parents clear and helpful?</i>	<b>Meets standard</b>
<i>4.9 Is the school properly maintaining special education files for its special needs students?</i>	<b>Meets standard</b>
<i>4.10 Is the school fulfilling its legal obligations related to access and services to English as Second Language (ESL) students?</i>	<b>Not Applicable</b>

**Standard 4: Is the school providing the appropriate conditions for success?**

<b>4.1. Does the school have a high-quality curriculum and supporting materials for each grade?</b>	
Does not meet standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>two or more</u> of the following areas: a) the curriculum does not align with the state standards; b) the school does not conduct systematic reviews of its curriculum to identify gaps based on student performance; c) the school does not regularly review scope and sequence to ensure presentation of content in time for testing; d) the sequence of topics across grade levels and content areas does not focus on core (prioritized) learning objectives; e) the staff lacks understanding and/or consensus as to how the curriculum documents and related program materials are used to effectively deliver instruction; f) there is a lack of programs and materials available to deliver the curriculum effectively.
Approaching standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>one</u> of the following areas: a) the curriculum does not align with the state standards; b) the school does not conduct systematic reviews of its curriculum to identify gaps based on student performance; c) the school does not regularly review scope and sequence to ensure presentation of content in time for testing; d) the sequence of topics across grade levels and content areas does not focus on core (prioritized) learning objectives; e) the staff lacks understanding and/or consensus as to how the curriculum documents and related program materials are used to effectively deliver instruction; f) there is a lack of programs and materials available to deliver the curriculum effectively.
<b>Meets standard</b>	<b>The school: a) curriculum aligns with the state standards; b) conducts systematic reviews of its curriculum to identify gaps based on student performance; c) the school regularly reviews scope and sequence to ensure presentation of content in time for testing; d) has a sequence of topics across grade levels and content areas that is prioritized and focuses on the core learning objectives; e) the staff understands and uniformly uses curriculum documents and related program materials to effectively deliver instruction; f) programs and materials are available to deliver the curriculum effectively.</b>

*No significant concerns were found.*

Because the students of the Damar Charter Academy possess a wide range of cognitive and social abilities, the school operates with what are essentially two different curriculums: students for whom the Indiana state standards are not appropriate the curriculum is the educational and behavioral content of their IEP, and students who are on track to earn credits toward graduation, for whom Damar Charter Academy uses the PLATO learning system to deliver the curriculum.

For those students on the PLATO curriculum, the school has a computer lab that is fully equipped for up to 15 students. The computer lab is monitored by a teacher from Damar Charter Academy who offers help and tutoring to the students. Because PLATO is aligned to the Indiana State Standards, this portion of the curriculum is also aligned to the state standards (indicator a). The use of the PLATO curriculum also precludes the need for conducting systematic review of the curriculum based on student data, nor is a scope and sequence analysis needed (indicators b & c). Core learning objectives are met through the PLATO curriculum, and all program materials are provided through PLATO and appear to be readily available to the teaching staff and students (indicator d). It was noted during this site visit that the number of students educated predominantly with PLATO had decreased substantially, and instead many students who could have been educated with PLATO were instead benefitting from classroom instruction.

The majority of students at Damar Charter Academy are being educated according to their Individual Education Plans (IEP), which are themselves aligned to the Indiana State Standards for special education students. Damar Charter Academy is unique in that it educates a population of students with cognitive and behavioral impairments, however, it is still held to the statewide accountability standards as are the rest of Indiana schools. Consequently, Damar Charter Academy has consistently earned an "F" on the statewide scale. The leadership, staff and parents of Damar Charter Academy conveyed that they understand that the accountability measures are in place to measure more "traditional" schools, and have come to accept their "F" grade for what it is--a judgment made based on a metric that is not appropriate for their school. One outcome of the "F" grade, however, is that representatives from the Indiana State Department of Education visit regularly to provide professional development. In collaboration with the DOE, the staff at Damar have undertaken a full review of their curriculum and are working to provide a more comprehensive set of curricular documents for the school, providing a school wide scope and sequence review, as well as a review of core learning objectives across the curriculum (indicator d). By using the presence of the DOE as an opportunity, rather than as a chore, the leadership and staff at Damar are working to align curriculum, behavior management systems, and assessments, providing a building wide approach that will help DCA to move forward in a cohesive way.

Focus group interviews with the Damar Charter Academy teaching staff revealed that they had at their disposal two effective assessment and curriculum tools in TeachTown and Aimsweb. The teaching staff was very knowledgeable about both online tools and expressed their general satisfaction with both programs. It was noted that TeachTown in particular was a welcome addition to the curriculum for the autistic children (indicator e).

Classroom observations and interviews with the teachers revealed that each classroom was equipped with programs and materials necessary to implement the IEP's of the students of Damar Charter Academy. When asked, the teaching staff noted that if there were programs or material needed, they could formally request them and they were usually provided (indicator f).

*Areas of Strength:* The Damar Charter Academy provides quality instruction for students with wide-ranging social and academic skills. The staff is knowledgeable in the PLATO curriculum, as well as in the use of TeachTown and AimsWeb.

In collaboration with the Indiana DOE, DCA leadership is completing a building wide review and alignment of curriculum, behavioral management systems and assessments is a priority.

*Recommendations.* None at this time.



4.2. Are the teaching processes (pedagogies) consistent with the school's mission?	
Does not meet standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>two or more</u> of the following areas: a) the curriculum is not implemented in the majority of classrooms according to its design; b) as delivered, instruction is not focused on core learning objectives; c) the pace of instruction/lessons and content delivery lacks the appropriate rigor and challenge; d) instructional activities lack variety and/or limited use of differentiated strategies to engage a wide range of student interests, abilities and learning needs; e) staff do not receive feedback on instructional practices.
Approaching standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>one</u> of the following areas: a) the curriculum is not implemented in the majority of classrooms according to its design; b) as delivered, instruction is not focused on core learning objectives; c) the pace of instruction/lessons and content delivery lacks the appropriate rigor and challenge; d) instructional activities lack variety and/or limited use of differentiated strategies to engage a wide range of student interests, abilities and learning needs; e) staff do not receive feedback on instructional practices.
Meets standard	The school exhibits the following characteristics: a) the curriculum is implemented in the majority of classrooms according to its design; b) as delivered, instruction is focused on core learning objectives; c) the pace of instruction/lessons and content delivery possesses the appropriate rigor and challenge; d) instructional activities possess variety and/or use of differentiated strategies to engage a wide range of student interests, abilities and learning needs; e) supplies sufficient feedback to staff on instructional practices.

*No significant concerns were found.*

Because of the individualized nature of the instruction at Damar Charter Academy, many of the traditional indicators of a high functioning school do not apply. Because the majority of the students are being educated based on IEP's, the teaching processes that are reflective of the school's mission are related to implementation of the individual IEP's and the teaching staff's skill in educating their students. Classroom observations revealed teachers doing far more than documented in a student's IEP (indicator a). For example, a great many different behavior modifications were being utilized. Further, students with a wide variety of academic and cognitive skills were placed in the same classrooms. Academic classroom instruction, when provided by the teacher, was observed to be focused on core learning objectives, which were all appropriate for the needs of the students being educated (indicator b). Given that behavior is a primary focus of Damar services, behavior should be considered a learning objective. It is unclear if consistency in behavior modification pedagogies across the building are taking place and if staff are receiving feedback on their behavior modification practices as part of their evaluations. Additionally, it is unclear if staff are using behavior data to modify behavior plans based on progress monitoring in similar ways as academic goals.

The classroom observations revealed that the Damar staff is very skillful in educating students with severe cognitive disabilities. It was noted that these teachers were particularly adept at interacting with their students, providing them with a variety of activities, such as movement, repetition and modeling, and that their classrooms were rich with educational materials. It was also noted that the classroom teachers showed very high level management skills and provided the students with firm and respectful requests, that the students were comfortable and compliant and that it was very obvious that the teachers were very committed to their students. The pace of instruction and overall activity was appropriate for the students of Damar Charter Academy (indicator c), and the goals of

the IEPs were tied to state standards. Classroom observations revealed that teachers are focused on state standards and adhering to the spirit and intent of what Damar Charter School strives to provide. Their instructional activities possess variety and/or use of differentiated strategies to engage a wide range of student interests, abilities and learning needs (indicator d).

During the previous site visit, it was noted that a group of students from Damar Charter Academy were still being instructed at “pod” classrooms located on the Damar Services campus. These "pod" classrooms were often not well staffed, the quality of the educational content being delivered was not of the same high quality and rigor as the education being provided at the main Damar Charter Academy campus. In order to provide the best possible educational environment to all students, the leadership at DCA discontinued the use of these classrooms in the 2014-15 school year.

Damar Charter Academy is in the process of implementing the RISE teacher evaluation system as mandated by the Indiana Department of Education. It is important to note, that RISE does not provide teachers with feedback or credit for managing behavior, and this is the primary role of most teachers at DCA. Focus group interviews with the teaching staff revealed that Ms. Brown and Ms. Gurule perform regular classroom walkthroughs and provide teachers with feedback regarding teaching practices. The RISE framework was recently revised to include indicators and measures more appropriate to Damar Charter Academy, and this revision was accepted by the Indiana Department of Education. With these changes, a framework is in place to provide sufficient feedback to Damar Charter Academy staff regarding their instructional practices (indicator e).

*Areas of Strength:* The Damar Charter Academy provides a rigorous and challenging education to students with severe cognitive disabilities.

Revision of the RISE teacher evaluation system now includes evaluative pieces that are appropriate for special education instruction.

*Recommendations:* None at this time.

<b>4.4. Does the school effectively use learning standards and assessments to inform and improve instruction?</b>	
<b>Does not meet standard</b>	The school presents significant concerns in <u>two or more</u> of the following areas: a) standardized and/or classroom assessments are not accurate or useful measures of established learning standards/objectives; b) assessment results are not received by classroom teachers in a timely or useful manner to influence instructional decisions; c) assessments lack sufficient variety to guide instruction for a wide range of student learning abilities; d) there is limited frequency or use of assessments to inform instructional decisions effectively; e) assessment results are not used to guide instruction or make adjustments to curriculum.
<b>Approaching standard</b>	The school presents significant concerns in <u>one</u> of the following areas: a) standardized and/or classroom assessments are not accurate or useful measures of established learning standards/objectives; b) assessment results are not received by classroom teachers in a timely or useful manner to influence instructional decisions; c) assessments lack sufficient variety to guide instruction for a wide range of student learning abilities; d) there is limited frequency or use of assessments to inform instructional decisions effectively; e) assessment results are not used to guide instruction or make adjustments to curriculum.
<b>Meets standard</b>	<b>The school: a) standardized and/or classroom assessments are accurate and useful measures of established learning standards/objectives; b) assessment results are received by classroom teachers in a timely and useful manner to influence instructional decisions; c) assessments have sufficient variety to guide instruction for a wide range of student learning abilities; d) there is sufficient frequency or use of assessments to inform instructional decisions effectively; e) assessment results are used to guide instruction or make adjustments to curriculum.</b>

*No significant concerns were found.*

Damar Charter Academy uses a variety of behavioral, academic and classroom assessments to determine their students' academic and behavioral levels. For those students who utilize the PLATO learning system, their academic growth is determined using the online assessments that are part of the online curriculum. Other assessments are administered as part of the requirements of their IEP and the data is used to inform the development and growth of the student. Damar Charter Academy utilizes Accucess (PLATO), AimsWeb, Teach Town, Achenbach, and PAES in addition to the ABAS-II, and ISTAR to assess students.

Damar Charter Academy also uses life skills assessments as well as a screening checklist to track growth (indicator a). Damar Charter Academy students are assessed regularly and thoroughly, and data from these tests is reviewed monthly by the teaching staff and when modifications to IEP's are made this data is included in that process (indicator d). The teaching staff reported during focus group interviews that they felt they were given accurate and appropriate data to determine their students' needs, with one teacher noting that "we get tons of testing and IEP data...the psych reports are also very helpful and we use all that data." Another noted that "all the information (data) is in the IEP...it's like our bible...the histories are so amazingly detailed, so we incorporate the IEP into our lessons." Thus, the data from assessments is integrated into IEP's and is being used to determine goals for each individual student. The teaching staff reported during focus group interviews that they receive data in a timely and useful manner (indicator b), and as noted above, the assessments

are varied and appropriate for a wide range of student abilities (indicator c). The efficacy of TeachTown was particularly noted, with the staff reporting that the adaptive nature of the program and off the assessments within the program was particularly useful with the autistic students.

Damar Charter Academy is showing exemplary data collection practices, with frequent and varied assessments. Damar staff uses student data effectively at the level of the individual student, as well as in the process of mapping the curriculum. Thus, Damar Charter Academy has both effective data gathering procedures in place, has been effectively using that data at the level of each student, and is currently using the data to modify school-wide instruction and curriculum.

*Areas of Strength:* Damar Charter Academy uses a variety of assessments and use this data to write their students' IEP's, ensuring that the IEP is data-driven and appropriate to each child.

Assessment of student behavioral data is thorough and informative.

Damar Charter Academy has been effectively using that data at the level of each student, and through the process of mapping their curriculum, is now using data to modify school-wide instruction and curriculum.

*Recommendations:* None at this time.

4.5. Has the school developed adequate human resource systems and deployed its staff effectively?	
Does not meet standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>two or more</u> of the following areas: a) hiring processes are not organized to support the success of new staff members; b) inefficient or insufficient deployment of faculty and staff limits instructional time and capacity; c) faculty and staff are not certified/trained in areas to which they are assigned; d) professional development (PD) does not relate to demonstrated needs for instructional improvement; e) PD is not determined through analyses of student attainment and improvement; f) the teacher evaluation plan is not explicit and regularly implemented with a clear process and criteria.
Approaching standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>one</u> of the following areas: a) hiring processes are not organized to support the success of new staff members; b) inefficient or insufficient deployment of faculty and staff limits instructional time and capacity; c) faculty and staff are not certified/trained in areas to which they are assigned; d) professional development (PD) does not relate to demonstrated needs for instructional improvement; e) PD is not determined through analyses of student attainment and improvement; f) the teacher evaluation plan is not explicit and regularly implemented with a clear process and criteria.
Meets standard	The school exhibits the following characteristics: a) hiring processes are organized and used to support the success of new staff members; b) the school deploys sufficient number of faculty and staff to maximize instructional time and capacity; c) faculty and staff are certified/trained in areas to which they are assigned; d) professional development (PD) is related to demonstrated needs for instructional improvement; e) PD opportunities are determined through analyses of student attainment and improvement; f) the teacher evaluation plan is explicit and regularly implemented with a clear process and criteria.

*Significant concerns were found in indicators b, c & f.*

Damar Charter Academy teachers meet all requirements for certification and training, with the staff certified or credentialed in their teaching area and licensed to teach the student population that they serve (indicator c). The majority of the teachers are teaching a course load that appears manageable, and the various staff members have distinct roles (indicator b). The teachers are all teaching in areas in which they are certified. Overall, the staff is deployed to best utilize their skills and training.

The staff of Damar Charter Academy work to provide a high quality and challenging education for their students. To accomplish this challenging task, DCA has designed a process that begins with highly trained professional special education teachers and their skilled classroom aides providing the quality instruction, a group of paraprofessionals who are in the classroom with the teacher and aide to provide help to individual students, to engage students to prevent behavioral incidents, and help to monitor the classroom to provide the best learning environment. Finally, Resource Staff are available to provide support should a behavioral event escalate to the level where physical interventions are necessary.

All three parts of this team must work in order for students to receive the quality education that is the goal of Damar Charter Academy. Focus groups, interviews and direct observation during the site visit provided evidence for the quality of the classroom instruction, as well as the skill with which the Resource Staff will intervene when necessary. However, the third part of the DCA team,

the paraprofessionals, are a continuing problem. The paraprofessionals are provided by Damar Services and are hired by Damar Services and then provided to DCA, and there are several issues with the current arrangement in regards to the paraprofessional staff (indicators b & c).

The first issue noted was the consistency of the paraprofessional staff. The teaching staff noted that because of the manner in which paraprofessional staff members are assigned by Damar Services it is very difficult to know on a consistent basis who will be working in their classroom each day. This lack of consistency was attributed by the teachers to frequent turnover in the paraprofessional staff, with either new staff being hired to replace paraprofessionals who had quit or supervisors at Damar Services keeping paraprofessionals on the main Damar campus because they are needed there. As one teacher recounted, the residential managers, who are in charge of paraprofessional staff assignments, will often assign her strongest paraprofessional to residential duty and replace them with a different paraprofessional because "they say that I can handle the loss of my strongest para." This also leads to inconsistency among the paraprofessional staff who are assigned to DCA, with one teacher estimating that she has had 11 or 12 different paraprofessional staff members in her class over the course of this semester. In addition to being difficult for the teaching staff to know who will be in their classroom on any given day, it is also hard on the DCA students. As one teacher noted, "they don't know my kids-- and they will escalate, and you can't have a complete stranger try to de-escalate a student, so the teachers have to come help--because that is what we do."

The second issue noted was the quality and content of paraprofessional training. According to the teaching staff, the paraprofessionals are trained to work in the residential section of Damar Services, and do not receive any training in classroom practices. As described by the teaching staff, the training they receive at Damar Services can actually run counter to the needs of the students and staff at Damar Charter Academy. An example cited by several staff members is the Damar Services policy that encourages the paraprofessionals to refrain from physical contact when a student is acting out or disruptive. This may be an appropriate response in the residential setting, however, at Damar Charter Academy the teachers are concerned with returning the student as quickly as possible to the classroom setting while still minimizing the disruption to the classroom, and importantly, ensuring that the student does not make it to the front door of the school, and potentially out to Decatur Boulevard. One teacher noted that "they tell them (the paraprofessionals) during training that it is hands off...they will watch the kids destroy things--- and they will not do anything...and then I will have to pull away from teaching to do something. Sometimes I think it would be better not to have them at all."

The final issue that the teaching staff relayed was related to the first two: the staff noted that they were understaffed in the classroom, both because of the quality of the paraprofessionals and the fact that the paraprofessionals were often taken from the classroom to fill other needs. One teacher noted, "It's hard to make progress academically—because I need more staff to support me in my high needs class... my students can make gains if they have the opportunity to—but I can't work magic by myself—I need more support."

The need to address the quality and consistency of the paraprofessional staff is not lost on the Damar Charter Academy leadership. During an interview with Damar Services Chief Executive Officer and Damar Charter Academy Superintendent Dr. James Dalton, Dr. Dalton noted that Damar Services and Damar Charter Academy leadership are working to find a solution to these problems. Currently, Dr. Dalton is approaching the problem of the consistency of the paraprofessional staff by working to give DCA leadership more supervisory responsibility for the paraprofessionals. Additionally, Dr. Dalton is working to improve the quality of the paraprofessional staff by leveraging partnerships with special education and workforce development groups in the Indianapolis area. If successful, these two initiatives would provide DCA with a well-trained and dedicated group of paraprofessionals that would serve as consistent and reliable members of the DCA staff.

The hiring processes used at Damar Charter Academy are common to Damar Services, and most of the human resources functions for the Damar Charter Academy reside with Damar Services (indicator a). The school leader and the rest of the school leadership do play an important role in the hiring process and have the last word in who will be hired to teach at Damar Charter Academy. The leadership at Damar Charter Academy reviews the resumes, interviews the candidates during campus visits, conducts panel interviews and observes the job candidates as they interact with the students. Damar Charter Academy makes a recommendation and Damar Services human resources then hires the teacher. The actual employment relationship at Damar Charter Academy is rather unusual in that the teachers at Damar Charter Academy are not employees of the school itself-- rather, they are employees of Damar Services. The implications of this arrangement are many, with the most important being that the lines of responsibility for staff evaluation and compensation decisions are unclear.

An additional complication arising from the unique relationship between Damar Services and Damar Charter Academy is in regard to the sharing of private student data between the two entities. Damar Services is a private residential entity, with regulations that must be followed to protect the privacy of its residents, and Damar Charter Academy is a public charter school, also with regulations to be followed to protect the privacy of its students. However, it was observed that there are numerous and untracked ways that students, and their confidential data, transition between these two entities. It was reported that Damar Charter Academy staff enter student data into the Damar Services online portal, 2X, and that this data is available to Damar Services staff, in violation of FERPA regulations.

Due to the ongoing work of aligning the Damar Charter Academy curriculum, professional development opportunities at DCA are now clearly aligned to demonstrated need for instructional improvement determined through the analysis of student attainment and improvement (indicators d & e). Focus group interviews with the teaching staff revealed that a more intensive focus on staff professional development started in the previous academic year. They currently have staff meetings in the afternoons and weekly professional development on Friday mornings. During the PD days the main activity has been the ongoing curriculum mapping. They have also included training for

the needs of Damar Charter Academy students, as well as developing new IEP goals. The staff reported that they felt funds were available to travel to professional development opportunities in their respective areas of specialization, and that the DCA leadership was supportive of their traveling to conferences. They noted, however, that they rarely take advantage of the opportunity to attend professional development during the school year noting "No one goes to a conference because leaving your class is going to be crazy.....Just being 15 minutes late is not good."

There was no clear teacher evaluation plan noted during the previous site visit, although Damar Charter Academy leadership was actively engaged in preparing for the implementation of the Indiana RISE teacher evaluation program (indicator f). The teaching staff reports that they are currently implementing the RISE teacher evaluation process, but because of turnover in the Principal's position they had yet to receive a formal classroom observation. They did note that Ms. Brown and Ms. Gurule are in frequently in the classrooms and are providing informal feedback on a regular basis. There was no written documentation regarding teacher observations and feedback provided in the current employee handbook, although this is likely due to the fact that the Employee Handbook is for the entire Damar Services staff and has not been modified for the use of Damar Charter Academy. It would be beneficial for Damar Charter Academy to have the implementation of the RISE evaluation system specifically included in the future editions of the Damar Charter Academy employee handbook.

*Areas of Strength:* The hiring processes at Damar Charter Academy are thorough and effective, and have led to the hiring of a dedicated, skilled and professional staff.

*Recommendations:* More professional development that advances the knowledge of the paraprofessional staff in areas concerning the education of the student population at Damar Charter Academy.

Clearer lines of responsibility regarding teacher evaluation and performance-based raises as they are to be implemented with the RISE teacher evaluation system.

Inclusion of the RISE evaluation system as part of the Damar Charter Academy Employee Handbook.



4.6. Is the school's mission clearly understood by all stakeholders?	
Does not meet standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>both</u> of the following areas: a) significant disagreements exist among stakeholders about the school's mission; b) there is a lack of widespread knowledge and commitment to the intentions of the school's mission.
Approaching standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>one</u> of the following areas: a) significant disagreements exist among stakeholders about the school's mission; b) there is a lack of widespread knowledge and commitment to the intentions of the school's mission.
<b>Meets standard</b>	<b>The school: a) has a mission that is shared by all stakeholders; b) has stakeholders possessing widespread knowledge and commitment to the intentions of the school's mission.</b>

*No significant concerns were found.*

The School Mission is very well understood by the school staff, the school leadership and by the parents of the Damar students. The students, parents and staff are also very the knowledgeable of the Damar Charter Academy mission, and are equally committed to the school's success. The mission of Damar Charter Academy is eloquently expressed by the teaching staff, who note that, "Our goal is to take kids who are not successful in other situations and give them as normal a school day as possible... when students are kicked out of other schools for behaviors—they can come here.. if they are low cognitively, they can come here. At other schools our kids are nuisances, they are in the way of things. Here they are the way of things." Another teacher stated that "every student comes in to Damar one way and goes out a different kid." Finally, one teacher recounted that her mission was to give students "things on the inside—goals, work ethic, self-control, and see them have pride in that.... the goal is to get a call from them 2 years later, or to see them on Facebook, and know you made them the best that they can be. You gave them the opportunity to be successful... everybody needs the opportunity to be successful."

*Areas of Strength:* The School Mission is compelling and reflects what is happening every day at Damar Charter Academy. The teachers are fully committed to the school vision, and the teaching staff, school leadership, parent and students are in agreement as to the vision of the school.

*Recommendations:* None at this time.

4.7. Is the school climate conducive to student and staff success?	
Does not meet standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>two or more</u> of the following areas with no evidence of a credible plan to address them: a) The school does not have clearly stated rules that enforce positive behavior; b) the school's discipline approach does not possess high expectations for student behavior; c) interactions between faculty and students are disrespectful and/or unsupportive and there are non-existing or unclear processes for resolution of conflicts; d) interactions between faculty and administration are unprofessional and/or unproductive.
Approaching standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>one</u> of the following areas with no evidence of a credible plan to address it: a) The school does not have clearly stated rules that enforce positive behavior; b) the school's discipline approach does not possess high expectations for student behavior; c) interactions between faculty and students are disrespectful and/or unsupportive and there are non-existing or unclear processes for resolution of conflicts; d) interactions between faculty and administration are unprofessional and /or unproductive.
<b>Meets standard</b>	<b>The school exhibits the following characteristics: a) the school has clearly stated rules that enforce positive behavior; b) the school's discipline approach possesses high expectations for student behavior; c) interactions between faculty and students are respectful and supportive and faculty and students are clear about processes for resolution of conflicts; d) interactions between faculty and administration are professional and constructive.</b>

*No significant concerns were found.*

The staff at Damar Charter Academy work very hard to provide students with a safe and welcoming climate for their students. The interactions between Damar Charter Academy Staff and their students are incredibly respectful, supportive and affectionate (indicator c). During the previous site visit it was noted that Damar Charter Academy did not have a discipline policy that was implemented consistently within the school setting, and then is also applied once the DCA students who were residential on the Damar campus returned home. Over the course of the past year, DCA leadership have made great strides in providing their students with a clearly stated and consistent discipline approach that possesses high expectations for students (indicators a & b). A recently developed progressive discipline document clearly outlines the behaviors that warrant a disciplinary action, and the levels of disciplinary consequences and supports that apply. The discipline policy is very detailed and clear, and in keeping with the overall mission of Damar Charter Academy, is appropriate for the student population of DCA, involves parents at all levels of consequences, and promotes positive behaviors through the use of behavior supports and scaffolds.

One major improvement is in the area of behavioral consequences being continued through the school day at DCA and on to the residential unit for students in residence at Damar. This has been achieved through the services of the Interventional Behavior (IBI) therapist. The IBI therapist provides the behavior plan for DCA students that is to be used in all environments. As the teaching staff noted, the IBI therapists are not associated with the staff on the unit or in the school, but rather serves as a bridge to communicate for the student across these two environments. These therapists work for the students and come to know them very well. As one teacher noted, "They (the IBI therapist) will come to the classroom and spend the day to figure out a kid...they communicate with us and they come over to the school. They develop a plan for each child and they do the same thing in both plans (the DCA behavior plan and the residential behavior plan). If the

child has a verbal prompt in the unit, then they have a verbal prompt at DCA." There have also been school wide discipline policies put in place by Ms. Brown and Ms. Gurule, although these are a work in progress and need to be completed (indicator a).

Observed interactions between the teaching staff and leadership were professional and constructive (indicator d). The teaching staff has a great deal of respect and affection for Ms. Brown and Ms. Gurule.

*Areas of Strength:* Relationships between students and staff are professional, respectful and effective.

Processes that ensure commonalties student behavior plans between DCA and the residential unit have been developed and implemented.

*Recommendations:* Continue to work on the design and implementation of the school-wide discipline plan.

<b>4.8. Is ongoing communication with students and parents clear and helpful?</b>	
Does not meet standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>two or more</u> of the following areas: a) there is a lack of active and ongoing communication between the school and parents; b) school communication is neither timely nor relevant to the parental concerns; c) student academic progress and achievement reports are not clearly reported and/or misunderstood; d) the school's communication methods are not well-designed to meet the needs of a diverse set of parents (e.g., not communicating in parents' native languages, communicating only in writing when many parents cannot read, holding meetings at inconvenient times for parents).
Approaching standard	The school presents significant concerns in <u>one</u> of the following areas: a) there is a lack of active and ongoing communication between the school and parents; b) school communication is neither timely nor relevant to the parental concerns; c) student academic progress and achievement reports are not clearly reported and/or misunderstood; d) the school's communication methods are not well-designed to meet the needs of a diverse set of parents (e.g., not communicating in parents' native languages, communicating only in writing when many parents cannot read, holding meetings at inconvenient times for parents).
Meets standard	<b>The school: a) has active and ongoing communication between the school and parents; b) utilizes communications that are both timely and relevant to the parental concerns; c) communicates student academic progress and achievement in reports that are understood by parents; d) the school's communication methods are designed to meet the needs of a diverse set of parents (e.g., communicating in parents' native languages, not communicating only in writing when many parents cannot read, holding meetings at convenient times for parents).</b>

*No significant concerns were found.*

Parents at Damar Charter Academy expressed high satisfaction with the teaching staff, leadership and levels of communication from Damar Charter Academy. During a focus group interview, parents of Damar Charter Academy expressed their satisfaction and their gratitude for the work being done by Damar Charter Academy. They noted the quality of the relationships between the teaching staff and the students, the high expectations set for their children, and the respect and affection that their children receive at Damar Charter Academy.

*Areas of Strength:* Parent satisfaction is very high, and the parents value the education their children are receiving at the Damar Charter Academy.

*Recommendations:* Damar Charter Academy should support parent efforts to establish and active Parent-Teacher Association.

<b>4.9. Do the school's special education files demonstrate that it is in legal compliance and is moving towards best practice?</b>	
Does not meet standard	The school's special education files present concerns in <u>two or more</u> of the following areas: a) services outlined within Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) do not adequately match the exceptional needs of the student; b) each need identified within the IEP does not have a corresponding goal and plan for assessment; c) all goals are not rigorous or based on state or national learning standards; d) evidence does not demonstrate that goals have evolved each year as the student developed; e) specifically designed curriculum is not outlined.
Approaching standard	The school's special education files present concerns in <u>one</u> or more of the following areas: a) services outlined within Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) do not adequately match the exceptional needs of the student; b) each need identified within the IEP does not have a corresponding goal and plan for assessment; c) all goals are not rigorous or based on state or national learning standards; d) evidence does not demonstrate that goals have evolved each year as the student developed; e) specifically designed curriculum is not outlined.
<b>Meets standard</b>	<b>All of the following are evident in the school's special education files: a) services outlined within Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) adequately match the exceptional needs of the student; b) each need identified within the IEP has a corresponding goal and plan for assessment; c) each goal is rigorous and is based on state and national learning standards; d) explicit evidence exists to demonstrate that goals have evolved each year as the student develops; e) specifically designed curriculum is outlined.</b>

*No significant concerns were found.*

This report compiles a review of all practices and procedures specific to special education services at Damar Charter Academy (DCA). The results of this evaluation are based on the following pieces of data collected onsite: classroom observations, review of internal processes and procedural manuals, interviews with staff, students with IEPs, review of 25% of IEPs housed at DCA, DOE data bases, DCA website, and follow up interviews with families of students with IEPs at DCA.

All of the following are evident in the school's special education files: (a) services outlined within Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) adequately match the exceptional needs of the student; (b) each need identified within the IEP has a corresponding goal and plan for assessment; (c) each goal is rigorous and is based on state and national learning standards; (d) explicit evidence exists to demonstrate that goals have evolved each year as the student develops; (e) specifically designed curriculum is outlined.

Damar Charter Academy is a truly unique learning environment. It meets the needs of students with significant disabilities; many of the DCA students have previously been, or are currently placed in, a residential setting. While they may be identified as an F school by the Indiana Department of Education, the results of this audit reveal a school that meets compliance under standard 4.9 (a, b, c, d, & e). Damar's documentation was legally compliant under all of the areas required for the audit.

4.10. Is the school fulfilling its legal obligations related to access and services to students with limited English proficiency?	
Does not meet standard	The school is <u>not</u> fulfilling its legal obligations regarding ESL students, and requires substantial improvement in order to achieve conditions such as the following: a) appropriate staff have a clear understanding of current legislation research and effective practices relating to the provision of ESL services; b) relationships with students, parents, and external providers that are well-managed and comply with law and regulation.
Approaching standard	The school is not yet completely fulfilling all of its legal obligations regarding ESL students, and requires <i>some</i> (but not considerable) improvement to fully achieve conditions such as the following: a) appropriate staff have a clear understanding of current legislation, research and effective practices relating to the provision of ESL services; b) relationships with students, parents, and external providers that are well-managed and comply with law and regulation.
Meets standard	The school is fulfilling its legal obligations regarding ESL students, as indicated by conditions such as the following: a) appropriate staff have a clear understanding of current legislation, research and effective practices relating to the provision of ESL services; b) relationships with students, parents, and external providers that are well-managed and comply with law and regulation.

Not applicable.